

Interpretation

A Road to Creative Enlightenment

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What is Interpretation? Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as: "An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information."¹

Tilden's statement is excellent but the author would like to suggest that interpretation is also:

"The translation of the technical or unfamiliar language of the environment into lay language, with no loss in accuracy, in order to create and enhance sensitivity, awareness, understanding, appreciation and commitment."

The final five words in the Risk definition comprise what will be referred to as the Sensitivity Continuum and will be expanded upon later to demonstrate the vital nature of their involvement in successful cultural interpretation.

Why Interpret?

Increasingly, people in developed countries suffer from extreme urbanization and tunnel vision which severely limit their ability to appreciate their relationship to the environment, past or present. Because of this, biological processes are frequently assigned to arbitrary and inaccurate categories of "natural" and "manmade" as though humans are somehow unnatural. Is the structure a caddis fly builds around itself for protection from environmental extremes somehow more "natural" than a family's brick home which serves the same purpose? An understanding of the interrelatedness of all life and a personal relevance is lacking and in critical need. We lack an understanding of cause and effect. We have become separated from reality. This is particularly true with historical events, experiences, and perspective. For example, when great-grandmother wanted to travel, she had to hook up a team to the wagon or buggy, not just jump in the car. The phrase "flash in the pan" meant a great deal to a hunter, faced with a charging grizzly, whose flint lock ignited only the powder in the pan and failed to fire the gun charge in the barrel of his weapon. To a high school student today it is, at best, a quaint comment the meaning of which is lost. To great-grandmother, "fast food" was when someone killed and plucked her chicken for her! She and great-grandpa had a hands-on understanding of cause and effect. They knew that whenever they ate, something died; whether plant or animal. They understood that one must cut a tree to have a house. The leather for their boots, shoes and belts they knew once surrounded the body of a steer! Interpretation can bridge the gap of time and provide personal relevance to things otherwise shadowed and obscure.

Our Ties with the Past

Ties with the past are critical. They give us a perspective from which to view ourselves. In a very real sense, we are our heritage; we are what went before. Our origins have forged us. They color our attitudes and actions. A vital fac-

tor in the development of historical perspective is a sense of the fleeting nature of time. To a teenage son, or worse, a nine-year-old, it is hard to believe that mother and father were not common residents with dinosaurs. "Did they have electricity when you were a kid?" they ask. "How 'bout TV?" How well the author remembers listening to his wife's grandmother tell of the building of Cove Fort in Utah and of traveling across the plains in a covered wagon. She recalled as a small child sitting on Brigham Young's lap, who commissioned her father to build the fort, as she played with and listened to his big pocket watch. Suddenly, history was not so distant.

Learning From the Past

It has been said that those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat history's mistakes. How can we learn from something about which we know nothing? Among other things, from the past we can learn that our ancestors did some things better than we. Coping may be one of those things. From the vantage point of a modern person riding in an air conditioned, heated, humidity controlled, automobile racing along the interstate at 70 miles an hour, it is hard to imagine traveling the same route more than 100 years ago in a covered wagon. Awareness of the rigors of pioneer travel can give us a better appreciation of the minor nature of our own trials. How can the trauma of a broken Nintendo compare with freezing and starving people on the Mormon Trail pushing and pulling a handcart miles and miles, day after day, week after week. A flat tire and the resulting wait for a tow truck takes on a different feeling when viewed from that perspective.

Global Perspective

Cultural interpretation can assure that we understand our part in the global ecosystem and help us realize that the past influences us even today. It can provide a sense of regional and heritage pride which will enhance citizen concern, protection, and preservation. Blended properly, historical interpretation can also give a sense of geographic awareness. Environmental, geographic, and historical understanding help us all become wholly integrated with the past, the present, and the future.

Interpretation As an Aid to Protection and Preservation

We protect what we understand and value. When feelings of stewardship evolve, vandalism is reduced. Earlier it was mentioned that a goal of interpretation was to create or enhance **sensitivity, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and commitment**. When we are insensitive, we do not perceive. However, it is possible to be aware and not understand a situation which may breed indifference or in some cases, fear. Perhaps indifference is most dangerous. An indifferent person either assigns no value or devalues the thing for which they have no feeling. It is, therefore, far easier to damage or destroy it since it apparently has no relevance to their life. An important aid of effective interpretation is to move the visitor through understanding to appreciation. Appreciation engenders value assignment. Valued things are protected. And finally, commitment comes into being as the visitor actively participates and protects.

How to Foster Stewardship

Stewardship feelings have been fostered by some agencies responsible for cultural and historic sites through programs actively involving those who are the source of problems. Junior ranger programs and teen cleanup groups

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made up of opinion leaders can result in great gain in education and protection.

Transportation Corridors—A Different Challenge

Interpreting a transportation corridor is a very different task than interpreting a tree, a botanic garden, a flintlock rifle, or a historic home. Distance alone can be a daunting factor. Not merely a 1/2-mile interpretive trail or a few yards through a home, the historic transportation corridor is usually many miles in length. It often passes through a wide diversity of jurisdictions including cities, counties or parishes, states, and federal lands. In many parts of the world, such a corridor may traverse more than one country. This diversity brings to bear many external influences which would not be the case if the entire area was clearly within the boundaries of a park or similar area.

Continuity and its Absence

Perhaps one of the most trying obstacles in corridor interpretation is the difficulty in building a sense of continuity in the visitor. What interpretation is done may be very limited and of low visibility. Visitors may travel only limited sections of the corridor. Often a land corridor such as the Oregon Trail or El Camino Real is represented today by a paved, divided, superhighway or interstate tracing, more or less accurately, its original route.

Corridors as Roads or History

Travelers on road systems are ordinarily not traveling to experience the historic corridor. They are simply using the road as a means to get to a destination and historical education is the farthest thing from their minds. Local people, particularly, using the road on a daily basis, learn to discount its value and take it for granted. More intensive interpretation is needed to establish and maintain an awareness and sense of continuity important to appreciation of the route.

Interpretive Resources

Interpretation, if it is to accomplish its goals must at once balance the need to minimize distraction from too many signs with the absolute necessity of doing enough. In general, historic transportation corridors suffer from sparse, obscurely placed, wordy attempts at interpretation. (Did Burma Shave ever let us forget about them for long? Did we look forward to reading their short rhymes?)

A wide variety of interpretive approaches may be used in interpreting historic transportation corridors. Some of those presented here are quite traditional, but some offer unusual, innovative ways to bring the corridor to life.

Architectural Themes

In some areas, communities along the route have chosen to establish architectural themes for businesses and other structures fronting on the historic corridor. The common designs lend continuity from town to town.

Wayside Exhibits

These are traditional and often represented by signs of wood or metal placed alongside the road. Too often, they are not at convenient locations permitting the motorist to stop. Wayside exhibits should be located at pull-off points with adequate parking. At least some signs should be large enough to be read from a moving vehicle. Those with more text should be at pull-offs. Advance warning must be provided to allow drivers time to slow to a safe speed and drive off the road at the stopping point.

In-vehicle Interpretation

Interpretation which allows drivers, pilots, and passen-

gers to receive interpretive information while in motion can be a valuable asset.

Flight Interpretation

Throughout the world many people travel on commercial aircraft. During flights which may be many hours in length, passengers read, listen to music, sleep, and a few look out the windows. From time to time, the pilot or first officer may make a few comments about scenic or historic areas being overflown but largely passengers are left to their own devices.

Airline travel can be a rich resource for extensive interpretation.

Video and Audio Interpretation

On longer flights movies are sometimes shown. But video and audio tapes related to the history of the area represent a potential interpretive tool of some importance. Most commercial airliners have multi-channel sound capability piped to each seat. Even with a movie in progress, passengers could have the option of tuning to one of the other channels on which interpretive tapes would be available.

Of course, audio tapes could be designed which would be rented or purchased prior to the flight and listened to with the passenger's own player.

Private Pilot Information

Tapes and brochures could be created for private pilots enabling them to fly from one place to another learning about the history of an area. The less-structured nature of private flights would permit them to travel great distances following a historic transportation corridor.

Other Transportation

Auto Caravans

Groups of people traveling in their private vehicles are led by an interpreter, stopping periodically along the way. Usually, everyone disembarks at points of interest. However, this is somewhat awkward both in terms of time and movement of people. In some areas, the lead vehicle uses a special radio receivable by each car on its AM or FM equipment.

Cassette Tours

Rented or purchased at travel centers (most cars have players), cassette tapes provide a means for drivers and passengers alike to receive far more extensive interpretation than would be possible through signs alone.

Bicycle Interpretation

Cassette tapes could be well received by bicyclists. Another opportunity is represented by conducted tours. Interested bicyclists traveling together can have a rich interpretive experience tailored to the specific corridor. Special self-guided bike trails could also be developed.

Float, Canoe and Boat Interpretation

Water transportation corridors represent unique opportunities for interpretation. Conducted and self-guided activities could be offered.

Radio Corridors

Museums and other facilities often use short-range radio transmitters as an interpretive tool. Visitors carrying a special receiver pass into the active zone and receive interpretive messages. Some parks, airports, and highway departments also use radio to impart information. Signs alert visitors to tune their car radio to a specified frequency to hear the messages. A series of such transmitters might be located at intervals along the entire length of a historic transportation corridor.

Visitor Centers

Located at information centers along the corridor, they may be staffed or not. Brochures, booklets, maps, dioramas, and high-tech information dissemination such as touchscreen video and computer terminals may be made available. Specialized centers along the route might also offer conducted activities.

Publications

Publications represent an almost endless series of opportunities including guide books and complete travel packages with maps, brochures and tapes.

Special Interpretive Safaris

Recently a group of Wyoming educators participated in a trek which traveled a 75-mile section of the Oregon Trail in wagons to learn first-hand something of the rigors of such ventures. Other corridors could lend themselves to this approach as well.

"In-Home" Tours

Laser disks, interactive video, ordinary video tapes and interactive multimedia computer games and simulations offer those who cannot travel the corridor a means for innovative learning and recreation.

Off-Site Interpretation

Programs taken to locations more or less distant from the corridor can be especially useful. They include:

School Programs

Agency personal and/or interpretive students might be used to present these at elementary and secondary schools.

Special Interest Group Interpretation

Most service clubs and organizations are constantly on the look-out for interesting programs and speakers. Such groups represent important opportunities for interpreters to increase the dissemination of information on a corridor.

Media Interpretation

Television and radio offer opportunities for special programs related to the corridor. Newspaper feature articles as well as articles in travel magazines represent other options.

Additional Interpretive Resources

Community Resources

Full advantage should be taken of resources represented by government agencies, private organizations, and special interest groups in the community. The following represent only a partial list but should provide grist for planning.

- 1) Chambers of Commerce.
- 2) Community stewardship programs. Each community assumes responsibility for the section of the corridor which passes through or is adjacent to their town.
- 3) Local historical societies.
- 4) Youth groups: Scouts, etc. "Honor Scouts" may be trained to serve as information aides.
- 5) School systems. Integration with primary and secondary school curriculum brings students into contact with the corridor and interpreters associated with university curricula in environmental education and interpretation represent a potential source of help.

Private enterprise

- 1) Book stores.
- 2) Local industries.
 - a) Resource-based
 - b) Long-term (historic) businesses
- 3) Hospitality industry.
 - a) Hotels/motels

- Video cassettes for viewing at motels via an in-house or closed-circuit transmission.

- Brochures/guidebooks/maps.

b) Restaurants

- Place mats
- Historical paintings, photographs.
- Historical artifacts.

c) Auto Clubs

- Tour guides (include relevant sections).
- Special tour materials.
 - 1) Cassette rentals.
 - 2) Special booklets, brochures.

4) Oil Companies

Travel Clubs (Mobil, Texaco, etc.)

County Resources

- 1) County historical societies.
- 2) Speaker pools.

Regional Resources

Regional parks and historical sites which cross county and municipal lines of jurisdiction. For example, the Huron-Clinton Metro Parks in Michigan and the Cleveland Metro-Parks in Ohio.

State Resources

- 1) Departments of Transportation
 - a) Signing
 - b) Printed materials.
 - c) State Information Centers
- 2) State historical societies.
- 3) Highway stewardship programs.

Interstate Cooperative Efforts

- 1) Booths at rest stops.
- 2) Bureaus of tourism.
- 3) Involvement of colleges teaching interpretation. Opportunities for college and university students to serve as interpreters along the corridor.
- 4) Local special interest groups.

Successful interpretation of historic transportation corridors requires involvement of a wide variety of agencies, industries, service clubs, special interest groups, youth groups and educational institutions, to name a few. The keys are coordination and correlation.

Internationally, we are very concerned today about cross-cultural conflict and lack of appreciation of cultural diversity and marginal understanding of the human environment in all its varied aspects. Historic transportation corridors, traversing, as they do, great distances and cultures offer a chance to bring together many people and races in a non-threatening venture which can be a mutually beneficial enterprise. Interpretation of these corridors can play a vital role in passive, pleasant and broad-based education for travelers and other visitors. Properly implemented corridor interpretation can truly be a life-changing experience. It can play a key role in how people perceive themselves and the universe in which we all exist. It deserves our best efforts.

Notes

¹ Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill. 1985.

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